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ABSTRACT

A study investigated whether students learning via a "whole-part-whole" approach to spelling would achieve at a higher level than the control sample learning conventionally. In suburban New Jersey, one class of 17 first-grade students was taught spelling in a conventional manner, with words introduced in isolation and then assessed in a weekly spelling test. Another class of 21 first-grade students was introduced to words in a whole-part-whole lesson format, in which they were exposed to specific words in context and words and spelling patterns in isolation, and then the same words in yet another "whole" context. A Word Awareness Writing Activity was administered to both groups as a pretest and again as a posttest. Results showed that the students who experienced the "whole-part-whole" format of instruction made greater gains toward conventional spelling. (Contains three tables of data and 18 references. An appendix contains the raw scores.) (SR)

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IMPROVING CONVENTIONAL SPELLING
THROUGH THE USE OF WORDS IN CONTEXT
VERSUS
WORDS IN ISOLATION

By

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ABSTRACT

This was a study of thirty-eight first grade students who attended a suburban, New Jersey elementary school during the 1994-1995 school year. Pre and post tests were administered in the area of spelling to determine which developmental stage of spelling the students had achieved. The hypothesis of the study was that students learning via a "whole-part-whole" approach to spelling would not achieve at a higher level than the control sample learning conventionally. The hypothesis was rejected.

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Does the use of spelling patterns and word analogies taught in context, aid in the learning of conventional spelling as compared to learning a spelling list in isolation?

When children begin writing their spelling conventions reveal much of what they understand about the printed word. Children begin by imitating writing in many creative ways. The precommunicative or preliterate speller will randomly string words together. The letters do not correspond to any sounds. The semiphonetic speller knows that letters represent sounds. The semiphonetic speller will spell using initial consonants and/or final sounds. The next category is the phonetic speller, this student represents all of the phonemes in a word, though spellings may be unconventional. For example, ATE=eighty. Next, the transitional spellers think about how words appear visually. They have an apparent visual memory of spelling patterns. These transitional spellers will display vowels in every syllable and use begin to use digraphs and inflectional endings in a conventional manner. For example, EIGHTEE=eighty. Finally, conventional spellers use correct spelling for a body of words categorized by instructional level.

One approach to teaching beginning spelling is to allow the student to develop through these stages of spelling. It is thought that encouraging students to use invented spelling does not result in poor spellers, but allows them to enjoy writing. Students are encouraged to write whatever way they can manage, and spell however they are inclined. However, there are instances when the teacher would like the student to be able to recognize and spell some words conventionally. One approach to teaching these conventional spellings is through the use of "big books" or poetry, that may or may not be related to a particular theme or unit of study. The words are introduced in context then specific vocabulary is taken out of the text in order to take a closer look at spelling patterns, word endings etc.. And finally, those spelling patterns are looked at again in another context and students can use word analogies in order to decode and spell unknown words. This approach is known as the whole-part-whole approach. Yet another approach is to teach lists of spelling words and have students write the word in a sentence, as opposed to a "big book" or poetry, and then be tested on the correctness of his/her spelling.

Research indicates that words taught using a whole-part-whole approach, in which spelling conventions are introduced and taught in a

meaningful, integrated manner allows students to better understand and use the English orthography. It is also thought that lists of words not related to a context, theme or unit of study and learned only in order to be tested are not usually retained by the student therefore correct usage is limited.

Hypothesis

Students will not develop more conventional spelling abilities after material is presented in a whole-part-whole lesson design with an emphasis on spelling patterns and word analogies when compared to a sample of students learning by the words in isolation procedure.

Methods and Procedures

The research was conducted in a Summit Public Elementary School located in an upper middle class suburban area using two first grade classes. One class that has seventeen students was the control sample and the other class that has twenty-one students was the experimental sample. A Word Awareness Writing Activity was administered as a pre-test, and again as a post-test screening for spelling errors.

The control sample was introduced to words in isolation then assessed using a traditional weekly spelling test. Misspelled words were re-written three times for reinforcement. Students in the control sample were expected to write the misspelled words in sentence for homework. The experimental sample was introduced to words in a whole-part-whole lesson format. In the beginning of the week students were involved in a shared reading experience using a big book or poem on chart paper. As the week progressed students, using what could be considered a "look-say" approach, took a closer look at the printed word. Students were asked to "underline the (-ake) words in the poem." For example, students were also asked to generate rhyming words based on a spelling pattern introduced in context. They were asked to respond through an art or writing activity. Once the students in the experimental sample are exposed to specific words in context and words and spelling patterns in isolation they then were shown the same words in yet another "whole" context. Thus creating a whole-part-whole lesson plan format. The experimental group learned conventional spellings through poetry, rhythm and rhyme, big books, and student made books. The spelling words were introduced in context, then removed from context in order to take a closer look at the spelling patterns, and finally

returned back to a meaningful context in order to make use of word analogies.

The Word Awareness Writing Activity which contains twelfth grade appropriate words was administered as a pre and post test to both the control and experience sample. The test scores ranged from 1 being the lowest to a 5 being the highest. A score of one indicates a precommunicative speller and a score of five indicates a conventional or correct speller. The mean, standard deviation, and t-tests have been computed to analyze the significance of the results of the two samples.

Results

As can be seen in Table One, the control sample mean was 0.72 greater than at the outset of the study, suggesting that the control sample had achieved greater spelling ability prior to the pretest, as noted by the t of 2.19, moreover, the difference was significantly below the 0.05 level.

TABLE I

Pretest Results of the Experimental and Control Samples

Sample	Mean	Standard Deviation	t
Experimental	2.57	0.99	2.19
Control	3.29	1.03	

Sig < 0.05

Table II, on the other hand, shows the post test results of the

TABLE II

Post test Results of the Experimental and Control Samples

Sample	Mean	Standard Deviation	t
Experimental	3.48	0.68	1.26
Control	3.82	1.01	

control samples and indicates that the experimental sample made a gain of 0.91 as opposed to the more modest gain of the control sample, 0.53 points. The t of 1.26 indicates that the difference between the mean at the conclusion of the study to be non significant.

To determine whether the mean gain between the samples was significant, a further analysis of the data was performed. Table III indicates

TABLE III

Mean Gain Scores of the Samples

Sample	Mean	Standard Deviation	t
Experimental	0.95	0.59	2.33
Control	0.53	0.81	

that the difference in mean achievement of the samples of 0.48 was significantly below its 0.05 level. The table shows that the experimental treatment produced larger effects over time.

Conclusions

The students who experienced the "whole-part-whole" format of instruction made greater gains toward conventional spelling. The students in the control sample were better spellers from the outset, therefore their scores did not reflect radical growth because they did not have that far to go to become conventional spellers.

While there have been many studies and literature written on the “whole language” approach, it appears that it is more advantageous to students when word study is approached eclectically. When students are instructed in a meaningful ways and also given an opportunity to take a closer look at words and how they work, students make greater progress. When learning is fragmented and not attached to a meaningful context students do not have a chance to understand fully how our language works. Learning rules about words that are only true one third of the time can be frustrating to some students. However, learning that takes place in the whole context all the time creates an environment where the student is expected to learn incidentally. Again, for some students this is possible but for others it is frustrating and ineffective. The most effective strategy perhaps is the “whole-part-whole” format where the skills are neither the driving force of the lesson or worse yet, ignored altogether. The students in the experimental sample were involved and enthused about learning. It appears from both their active participation and the results of this study that word study that is approached using the experimental treatment of “whole-part-whole” produces greater gains in students.

Spelling Instruction: Related Literature

According to Richard Gentry (1985) there are five developmental stages to writing. The first stage is the "precommunicative stage", in which the child uses letters to write words. However, the letters do not correspond to sounds and are strung together randomly. The second stage is the "semiphonetic stage". Semiphonetic spellers know that letters represent sounds. Spellings often contain the initial and/or final sounds. An example of this stage of writing would be b=bed. The third stage is the "Phonetic Stage", in which spellers spell words the way they sound. An example of this stage would be uv=of. The next stage is the "transitional stage", in which spellers think about how words appear visually. Spellings exhibit conventions of English orthography like vowels in every syllable and vowel digraph patterns. An example of the transitional stage would be bumpy=bumpee. The last stage is the "correct" or "dictionary" spelling. Gentry concludes that correct spellers develop over years of word study and writing. Correct spelling can be determined on the basis of the students instructional level. For example, a body of words spelled correctly by the average fourth grader is considered fourth grade level correct spelling.

In the "whole language" classroom teachers are using their understanding of these developmental stages to teach and assess students

spelling. Students are encouraged to write and not to worry about correct spelling in the early grades. Castle and Coate (1989) point out that children love to "show and tell" in kindergarten, so why not use their natural abilities to help them write and read? They suggest a combination of a language experience approach with invented spelling to accomplish these goals. Invented spelling would be defined as anything falling along the continuum of the first four stages of spelling. Children are encouraged to share their writing with others by sitting in an authors' chair and reading to their classmates. Open discussions about their understanding of the written word is encouraged. Whether a student demonstrates sound/symbol correlation, groups of letters making up words and space between words are determining factors in that students understanding of concepts of print.

In the past there may have been separate lessons for spelling, reading, writing, and handwriting. In the "whole language" classroom there is an attempt to integrate all of the language arts and other curriculum areas. Reading and writing are done for meaningful purposes. For example, writing in a diary about a personal experience, writing about a shared class experience like a field trip or a science experiment, writing a letter to a favorite author or illustrator. Many opponents of "whole language" have

said that although students are having meaningful experiences their learning is haphazard and incidental in the area of spelling. It is felt that students need direct instruction in spelling despite their developmental stage. The method of spelling lists given in isolation and tested using a traditional spelling test is not used in the "whole language" classroom.

Bartch (1992) solved the challenge of integrating spelling instruction into a whole language classroom. She recognized a pattern that certain children always failed the spelling test, while others knew the words without even studying. Others would receive 100% on the spelling test, yet misspell the same words in their written work. The concern was that there was no evidence of growth in spelling performance.

In lieu of spelling workbooks, Bartch introduced mini-lessons on spelling strategies. She eliminated weekly tests. For forty-five minutes, once a week she encouraged students to spell each at their own level. Students chose words they wanted to learn to spell, and overtime were writing sentences. Strategies like word banks, dictionaries and thesauruses, printed resources, word walls, environmental print and spelling rules were utilized. Knowledgeable readers and writers, were encouraged to move forward and challenge themselves in the area of spelling. For example, they

substituted synonyms for words that allowed them to learn new spellings and spelling rules. For the first four weeks the teacher used the word bank strategy. Each student had 3x5 index cards with his or her words. Eventually other strategies were introduced for those students who were ready.

Blassberg and O'Flahavan (1992) suggest that the spelling program should not exist apart from the writing program. Most spelling programs today are defined as formal or informal. Informal programs may be defined as instruction that is child-centered. Understanding where children fall along the developmental writing continuum allow the teacher to design instruction and assess students. Formal spelling programs generally occur within a separate time slot apart from the total language program. The instruction is not oriented to the learner's developmental stage. The instruction is normative and organized around a scope and sequence of generalizations. Blassberg and O'Flahavan define these two approaches as either insulated from or embedded within the learners development and the language program.

Spelling programs that utilize an integrated approach combine inductive learning, scaffolding, and direct instruction. Learning the

conventions of our English orthography is extremely challenging for the emerging reader and writer because our alphabet contains twenty-six symbols and forty-four sounds. Goodman (1993) notes that the complexities in our language occur because of the multiple language roots that contributed to it. Our language roots are derived from Anglo-Saxon, Danish, Greek, Old English, German, and French. The letter /n/ appears to be a stable letter because it has only one corresponding sound. From Greek, Old English and German we have words like gnaw, ignite, and gnat. From Greek we also have words like pneumonia. From French roots we have words like campaign, sign, and reign. In other instances the /n/ sound becomes passive, as in want and went. These phonic irregularities are confusing and frustrating to the beginning speller. The emergent literate experience feelings of despair over the lack of consistency of patterns in our English orthography.

In an insulated spelling program, spelling instruction often involves memorizing individual words with no relationship to reading or the writing process. The spelling practice is often rote and does not involve self-discovery or a gradual release of responsibility onto the learner. The

learning and assessment practices of an insulated spelling program are not authentic or integrated across the curriculum.

In the embedded spelling program students have a more individualized learning experience. Students are working and learning based on his/her developmental stage. Through the use of authentic writing activities students are able to see where they started and how much they've learned. Writing samples are saved and used to assess the needs of individual students, as well as set instructional objectives for mini-lessons. An integrated spelling approach, as used in the "whole language" classroom, allows students to incorporate his/her prior knowledge. Pearson (1994) states that reading is an act of interpretation that relies as much on knowledge and experience as it does on perception and recognition of the message on the printed page. He also states that to make this insight an instructional reality would be exciting. The same could be said about spelling.

Many teachers understand the developmental stages of writing. These instructors are exposing their students to language rich environments, using thematic units, shared and independent reading and writing experiences and are supporting reading at home. However, students in

some classrooms are not experiencing the direct instruction that is needed in order to adapt a spelling approach that will be effective in today's "whole language" classroom. Groff (1994) notes that teachers are warned that direct and systematic spelling instruction actually will inhibit the development of spelling skills. "Whole language" proponents maintain that students learn how to spell merely by writing often. It is thought that by simply immersing students in a literature rich environment they will become conventional spellers. Groff (1994) discovered that students who were involved in direct and systematic spelling programs were found to be more conventional spellers

While it is important to make instruction meaningful to students, we cannot forget about direct instruction and guidance. It is important to teach students using developmentally appropriate practices. However, students cannot learn incidentally or haphazardly. Cooper and Opitz (1993) developed a spelling workshop in their classroom. Sixty to Seventy-five minutes a week is allotted for formal spelling instruction. Pre and post tests are administered. Students correct their own spelling tests and are taught systematic spelling strategies. Games are used to make spelling fun. Spelling is an important component of a balanced language arts program

and the use of direct instruction needs to be adjusted to fit with the “whole language” approach to teaching. Explicit teaching in the area of spelling should not involve teaching meaningless sight words that won’t be retained by the student. It should involve a combination of direct instruction and authentic writing activities.

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Appendix

WORD AWARENESS WRITING ACTIVITY RAW SCORES

CONTROL SAMPLE CLASSROOM NO. 1 - 17 STUDENTS			EXPERIMENTAL SAMPLE CLASSROOM NO. 2 - 21 STUDENTS		
STUDENT NO.	PRE-TEST	POST TEST	STUDENT NO.	PRE-TEST	POST TEST
1	2	3	1	3	4
2	3	4	2	1	3
3	5	5	3	1	3
4	4	4	4	3	4
5	3	4	5	3	4
6	1	1	6	2	3
7	3	3	7	3	4
8	4	5	8	3	4
9	4	4	9	1	2
10	3	3	10	3	3
11	2	3	11	3	4
12	4	5	12	3	4
13	4	4	13	3	3
14	3	4	14	3	4
15	4	4	15	4	4
16	3	4	16	3	4
17	4	5	17	4	4
			18	1	3
			19	1	2
			20	2	3
			21	4	4